

# 'I was just thinking ...' about our town

**A**s you may know, a local Boston area journalist frequently opens his column with this phrase. I think it's a good way to share thoughts and to hopefully evoke some thinking.

I was just thinking, why don't our School Building Committee (SBC) and the vast majority of our Town Meeting members want to discuss and develop various alternatives to fixing our high school? After all, aren't we still in a recession? We're a country at war and our town finances aren't too good ... If we all agree that something has to be done with our high school, why can't we develop alternative, more conservative and less costly plans? I like choices — do you?

I was just thinking, why do some of our elected and appointed town officials get so defensive when a town bylaw article is introduced that will improve on the "self-policing" state ethics financial disclosure process? Each member, in addition to taking a verbal oath, would sign a simple one page statement that the member (and their spouse) do not have any employer, business interest or investment that could conflict with their objective participation on the committee they serve. This article is not redundant with state ethics law. It proposes to add an additional requirement (signed statement) at the town level. Would this signed statement raise the awareness by all to disclose potential conflicts and improve the process? With all the process problems at the Reading Municipal Light Department (RMLD), would this bring a higher level of accountability in our town?

I was just thinking, how come the SBC is the only committee, board or commission in town

## Guest Commentary

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that does not have operating procedures? Why are some members of our community who attend these meetings, who may have different opinions, or who question some of the actions and motivations of the committee cut off? Shouldn't all members of our community be treated respectfully? Why are SBC members appointed for life and have no term limits? Why doesn't the SBC rotate leadership? Do you think the SBC needs operating rules, rotating leadership, term limits and alternative plans to upgrade and recondition our high school?

I was just thinking, with our town in such financial straits, how do the Board of Selectmen, as a matter of priority, and the RMLD come up with almost \$100,000 to contract with two companies to investigate the RMLD, after the state's investigation already found wrong-doing by some RMLD officials? Why were Town Meeting members who submitted articles for the spring Town Warrant treated with disapproval? There is one new candidate for selectman. Do you think the voters of Reading should give him a chance?

I was just thinking, if one of the affordable housing provisions of the Community Preservation Act (CPA) allows a family of four to have income of up to \$65,000 a year, do you want to vote for this property tax surcharge and subsidize housing for a family with income up to this limit? The current federal poverty income guideline for a family of four is \$18,100. Some derivative of this figure might be reasonable to determine the CPA income limit — but should it be 3-1/2 times this figure? What about CPA resource guidelines? What about assets? Are there limits?

I was just thinking, have you observed the behavior and attitudes of some of the members on our School Committee? Do you think that

some of these folks would pass the bullying program over at the Barrows School? Are you embarrassed? Would you want your children to watch their behavior? Frankly, I'm embarrassed and disappointed. Election time is coming — do you think we may need new people on the School Committee? I hope that you look carefully at the candidates in April's election.

I was just thinking, where were 62 of the 192 elected representative Town Meeting Members last fall when it came time to vote on the article for the \$450,000 high school design proposal? Sixty-two missing — that's almost 1/3 of the entire Town Meeting absent to vote on a proposal that could very well lead to the most expensive town building project in our town's history! I'm sure some folks had a legitimate reason for not being there — most didn't. Should we reelect those folks to Town Meeting? You can call the town hall and determine from the checker list who was not there that night. By the way, the "exact number" of members missing for this vote was 32.3 percent (after all, math is an exact science).

I was just thinking, maybe I think too much and should stop here. Although you may not agree with some or all of my thoughts, I hope it got you thinking. These matters are no joke and I take them all seriously. This town needs more good people to get proactively involved, to bring new ideas to the table and think creatively "outside the box" in an atmosphere that is both positive and supportive. For those folks that want to control and manipulate what we do in town, go home and please stay there until you successfully complete the Barrow's bullying program.

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